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The Harvard Rule

On too many university campuses, the Central Intelligence Agency is regarded more as a threat to American civil liberties than as a first-line defense against our enemies. The campus culture declares that the CIA more often spies on us than on our enemies. The consequences of this outlook are costly in tolerance as well as security and are sad to watch.

Harvard University has succumbed to the sickness. Harvard won't let its faculty do CIA work—except openly! Harvard says very forthrightly that the no-secrecy rule buttresses the teacher-pupil relationship, which is undermined by a student's even thinking that a professor might be working for the CIA!

In spite of the rule, Harvard professors are indeed working secretly for the CIA. The CIA admits it. The agency ignores the Harvard rule as selective (it applies to nobody else) and as merely reflecting student prejudice. So Harvard wants Congress to enforce the rule for it and make the CIA cease clandestine recruitment there.

Should Congress do so? We think not. If Harvard wants to regiment its faculty's behavior to comport with student prejudice, that's Harvard's business. And so is the enforcement and the punishment—firing, though, from a libertarian standpoint, the rule stinks.

Subordinating an acedemic's private life to the service of campus prejudice is ugly enough. But the notion that all Harvard teachers now labor (as Harvard President Derek Bok says) under a student suspicion of being CIA agents is a shameful commentary on a great university's capacity for ignorant intolerance. It smacks of the Jewish grandmother test of Aryanism practiced in Hitler's Germany.

Finally, the hallucinatory assumption underlying the Harvard rule itself—that a CIA recruit is an automatic spy on his own people—is as pitiful an obcession as any center of learning ever publicly convicted itself of.

But it's Harvard's problem, squaring the implications of its CIA rule with its own notions of personal freedom and public image. Its effort, however, to make Congress—and hence the American people—a party to its repressions ought to get a quick no on the most logical of grounds—that it's perfectly lawful for the CIA to recruit anybody that wants to work for it.

If it makes no sense for Congress to perform Harvard's censorship for it—it would make even less sense for Congress to enjoin the CIA's pursuit of goals laid down by charter. The CIA IS a claudestine agency, but that does't mean it's evil for anyone to work for it. Countless Americans have done so and for the best of motives, patriotism. Why not university professors?

The CIA's Harvard recruits (says the CIA) consider their work neither a breach of professional ethics nor an act of disloyalty to Harvard, Harvard can, of course, fire them with the same freedom they themselves exercise in choosing to do their country's security work. But the Senate Select Committee shouldn't put the Harvard faculty off limits to clandestine CIA recruitment. The rightness or wrongness of what the teachers do is strictly between them and Harvard.

We wonder whether, in fact, the Harvard administration really has full student license for what it's doing. We'd hate to see a poll proving it. But if it is so, the university, its faculty and its student body are in deeper trouble with their own notions of civil liberties than they can ever be with the CIA's occasional lapses in that area.